THAT WE MAY DWELL IN PERFECT UNITY
JOHN M. BUCHANAN
PREACHED AT FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CHICAGO
JULY 13, 1997

"making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."
Ephesians 4:3

I love that incident reported in the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew when, out of the blue, Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is and Peter, also out of the blue, answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

I was thrilled to visit the place where it happened – the ancient Roman town of Caesarea Philippi with a group from Fourth Church, gathered under a huge, old olive tree and to read this wonderful incident. The question Jesus asked focuses on the heart of Christian faith. What you and I think and believe about Jesus of Nazareth is the question. Our belief in him, our trust in him, our commitment to follow him, our obedience to him is what allows us to call ourselves Christians. The theological name for it is "Christology."

I still love that text. I still love that moment when Peter, out of the blue, says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But there is a second part to that important text. It does not get nearly as much attention, particularly in Protestant preaching and scholarship.

> *"Blessed are you Peter. On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."*

My, we wish that weren't in there. We Protestants are uncomfortable with what the Roman Catholic tradition has done with Peter and the keys of the kingdom. And so, we have not spent nearly as much energy on the second part. We are far more interested in Christology than ecclesiology, thinking about the church. When the great creeds have us say, "I believe in the holy catholic church," we say if, of course, but I do believe Presbyterians, generally, cross their fingers when we come to that phrase.

Believe in the church? Believe in the church as a basic item of personal faith? Christology moving smoothly to ecclesiology? For most of us, that's quite a journey.

Annie Dillard says it for most of us. Dillard produced an essay on the Gospel of Luke in a volume of contemporary writers on the New Testament. About the end of Luke, she says:

> "What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians

between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core, full of wild ideas and hurried self-importance. Who can believe in the Christians...?" [*Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, p. 36/37]

Dillard is right. It is not a pretty picture from the start. The earliest Christian tradition of all is argument, contention, divisiveness. It's why Paul wrote letters. In Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Christians argued about doctrine, the conduct of sacraments, leadership.

Paul tries scolding the Corinthians, tells them there is a better way to be Christian, in fact, a better way to be human. It's the way of love. But the older Paul becomes, the wiser and more mature, the more he ponders the unfathomable mystery of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the bigger and broader his vision of the church becomes.

Near the end of his life, in a Roman jail cell, he writes to the church in Ephesus. Now his emphasis is the unity of the church, the reconciliation between its Jewish and Gentile members. Get this: the unity of that church would demonstrate to the world the truth of what God had done in Jesus Christ and continues to do in the world through the work of the Holy Spirit.

> *"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."* Ephesians 4:1-3

Is there a more passionate – or relevant – plea in scripture?

Paul's thought had lately taken wing. Now he believes that in Jesus Christ God has started a new creation, a new humanity. In Christ, God – with a plan before the ages – intends to heal divisions, break down walls of hostility, unite all things. Paul soars as he sits in that miserable jail cell. "He is our peace," he says about Jesus. God's purpose is to bring together the human race, tribes, nations, slaves, free, women, men.

And the church is supposed to show the world what God's new creation looks like. Markus Barth, in his classic commentary on Ephesians, says, about that wonderful admonition, "Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit," "... it is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort is meant, involving will, sentiment, reason, physical strength. Do it now! You are to do it. I mean it!" [*Ephesians*, Markus Barth, Vol. II, p. 428]

Barth translated the critical phrase: "Take pains to maintain the unity of the Spirit." It is painful, is it not? It is painful to maintain unity with people you know are

wrong and obnoxious on top of it. It is – I propose – a lot more difficult to maintain the unity than to walk away, to destroy it.

Now, wait a minute. Are you proposing that belief in the church is of comparable weight with belief in Jesus Christ and, furthermore, that the church's unity is as important as my individual conclusions about this or that? That's exactly what I'm suggesting and I am convinced that's exactly what the Bible says.

I love this church of ours and the Reformed tradition that lies behind it. But I do believe it is time for us to repent, to confess that we have not heard God's summons to unity and reconciliation as clearly as we should.

In a recent issue of *Reformed World*, Lukas Vischer points out that Reformed churches do not have a particularly good record when it comes to unity. "There is," he observed, "hardly a country where several Reformed churches do not exist side by side."

The Presbyterian Church is big in Korea. In my year as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we learned that there are 88 Presbyterian denominations – few of them huge, most of them tiny, each of them convinced that their separation from the rest is important to their identity. There are three Presbyterian denominations in Brazil and three in Chile, ten in this country.

Lukas Vischer makes this observation: "Reformed churches constantly succumb to the temptation to solve their internal tensions and disagreements by splitting up." ["Mission in Unity," *Reformed World*, April 1997, p. 33]

One of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets, the late Phyllis McGinley, is "How to Start a War."

> "Said Zwingli to Muntzer ..." [Zwingli and Muntzer were two 16th Century leaders of the Protestant Reformation who disagreed vigorously on the mode of baptism sprinkling—Zwingli, or total immersion—Muntzer.]
>
> "Said Zwingli to Muntzer
> 'I'll have to be blunt, sir,
> I don't like your version
> of Total Immersion.
>
> And since God's on my side
> And I'm on the dry side,
> You'd better swing ovah
> To me and Jehovah.'
>
> Cried Muntzer, 'It's schism,

Is infant Baptism!
Since I've had a sign, sir,
That God's will is mine, sir,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to Hell, singly,'
Said Muntzer to Zwingli,

As each drew his sword
On the side of the Lord."

[Phyllis McGinley, *Times Three, Selected Verse*, New York, The Viking Press, 1960, p. 28]

I was being interviewed by a reporter from one of the major weekly news magazines about Amendment B. After trying everything he could think of to get me to say I thought our church was about to split, he finally said, with a little exasperation, "Look, I've talked to both sides. I know what they're saying about each other. You're already two churches. So why don't you just call a meeting, hire a good lawyer, get a divorce, split up the property and move on?"

Bruce Bawer said the same thing in a *New York Times* Op Ed column. American Protestantism is in the midst of a major shift. "It is being split into two nearly antithetical religions, both calling themselves Christianity." The battle in the Presbyterian Church, he said, shows that we are already two churches: "a church of law and a church of love." And I was reminded of how many times this year Presbyterians have said to me and written to me long and passionate and sad letters saying, "I have to leave if Amendment B passes. I cannot stay any longer." I thought about how many people on the other side said, "This is a deal breaker, a boundary issue. If this doesn't pass, I'm 'outta' here." And how many now are saying, "I quit, this is it."

Does it matter? Does the unity of the church matter as much as my conscience, my convictions, my opinions which I increasingly believe are God's opinions as well? Yes, it matters. It matters because Paul was right, whether we like it or not. The church shows the world what God's new creation looks like. And if what we show the world is a fractured, broken fragmented mess, that, I believe, is a major failure, a very serious sin.

Beverly Gaventa says this lection from Ephesians should be painful reading for contemporary Christians. "The unity of the church is for its mission and its evangelical credulity." [*Texts for Preaching*, Year B, 1993]

Our unity is for our evangelical credibility. It doesn't take much experience with our Presbyterian Worldwide Ministries Division to understand the truth of that.

The Presbyterian Churches in Brazil, divided by theology, are moving deliberately closer to one another because they face an evangelical opportunity of enormous dimensions. And they will be more effective when they are one church again.

Where Christianity confronts Islam, our unity is absolutely essential. Nothing ends the dialogue quicker, nothing, I am told, discredits the Gospel more effectively than bickering between Christians.

Peter Kuzmic is the President of the Evangelical Seminary in Ocijek, Croatia, where Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission workers Steve and Michele Kurtz serve on the faculty. Peter, who is a Calvinist Pentecostal and one of the leading missiologists in the world, teaches that missionary effectiveness depends on authenticity and that there is no authenticity in mission that does not reflect not only Christian unity, but the deeper, magnificent new creation, new humanity, that St. Paul talked about.

One of Kuzmic's colleagues is a delightful Croatian of Serbian descent, Antol Bolag. Antol was a businessman who decided to give his life to Jesus Christ. He is now managing refugee resettlement, sponsored by the Agape Project, which is supported by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s One Great Hour of Sharing.

Antol is in charge of rebuilding villages that have been destroyed in the war and resettling refugees. He was working with the mayor—village chief – of a Muslim village that was totally destroyed. Antol was bringing together the materials and resources to rebuild the village, one house at a time. Looking at the plans with the Muslim chief, he noticed that the village mosque was not on the drawing and he inquired about it. His Muslim colleague was surprised. "You're a Christian, aren't you? You want to convert us. Why are Christians willing to help us rebuild our mosque?" And Antol Bolag said, "We will help you rebuild your mosque because we are followers of Jesus, and Jesus told us to love our neighbors, to stand with them. And Jesus told a story one time about a good Samaritan who helped his neighbor without asking him about his theology."

That's authenticity. That's evangelism and faithfulness. That's what St. Paul meant, I believe, about God's new humanity.

Unity is for mission. In our oneness the world sees something of God's new creation.
So what if the Presbyterian Church of ours saw this moment in our long history – our history of contention leading to regular divisions – what if we saw it as a God-given opportunity to make our witness? What if we decided that we have – precisely because the world, for better or worse, is watching us on this issue, watching to see how bad it gets – what if we decided that we have a God-given

opportunity to say a word about Jesus Christ – by our unity, by our determined effort to maintain the unity of the Sprit? What if, instead of backing away from one another, we listened carefully to St. Paul's passionate plea – to make every effort, take every pain, leave no stone unturned, spare no effort to maintain the unity? I think the world might find truth in that and reconciliation and hope.

What has gone wrong? It seems so simple. What goes wrong is that somewhere along the line we forget about grace. Somewhere along the line we forget the fundamental message and example of Jesus which, after all, did not have much to do with theological correctness or, for that matter, moral purity, as defined by the religious wisdom of his day. Somehow along the line we forget what Reynolds Price says sent Jesus to his death – namely his insistence on sweeping into the Kingdom the very ones his society and religion had marginalized and cast out.

Somewhere along the line we forget that you don't get to be a friend of Jesus because you are better than everyone else, or holier, or smarter, or have more faith. You get to be a friend of Jesus because he invites you to be his friend, just as you are, and somewhere in your heart you say "yes" to him.

It's remarkable. It's fundamental and it is so radical we can't seem to stand it. So we attach conditions and standards and barriers and boundaries. "Oh yes – we know about grace – but we have to have boundaries, don't we?"

We forget about grace. My good friend Joanna Adams, in a remarkable sermon preached at the General Assembly meeting in Syracuse, said, "Grace is like grits." Now the retelling loses a lot if not done in its native tongue. Joanna speaks "Mississippi." She says her sorority sisters used to call her "Magnolia Mouth." Joanna tells about the weary traveler from the North, a Yankee, who was driving through the South; he'd driven all night and pulled into a roadside diner. He ordered the usual: juice, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, coffee. When his breakfast arrived, he noticed a lump of gray, mushy stuff, sitting beside his eggs.

"What's that?" he asked the waitress.

"Why, honey, that's grits." (When Joanna says it, it has two syllables.)

"I didn't order grits," he said.

"Honey, down here, you don't have to order grits. Grits just comes."

"Grace is like grits," Joanna says. Grace is how we get in. The most meaningful metaphor is a banquet table God is preparing for all whom God loves. In a recent essay, Douglas Jacobson reminds us that that new and redemptive and faithful church emerges as we each feel drawn to it. "We do not invite each other to that table, nor do we have the power or right to exclude from that table anyone whom

God has invited. Thus, our main preoccupation ought to be with our own table manners. What rules of godly etiquette do we need to learn to keep ourselves from being embarrassed either by our own fastidiousness or our crassness at that sumptuous banquet where by God's grace we will one day sit down." [Douglas Jacobsen, "Re-forming a Sloppy Center By and With Grace," *Interpretation*,, April 1997]

John Calvin was not hesitant to speak his mind, nor was he particularly easy to get along with in academic, theological debate. But he did understand the evangelical importance of our oneness. "I would cross seven oceans," he wrote, "to advance the cause of Christian unity."

And attributed to him are, I think, some of the loveliest words ever written, and most important. They are in the fourth verse of a great hymn, "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art." They surprise me and move me every time I sing them. May they be our prayer.

> "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness
> No harshness hast thou and no bitterness
> O grant to us the grace we find in thee
> That we may dwell in perfect unity."

Amen.